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Conclusion

It should be apparent from our discussion that we human beings are extremely complex, and our intimate relationships are even more so. Relationship problems occur with varying levels of difficulty that correspond to different levels in our nervous system. Paradox rules us at the deepest level. Instead of our personalities being one consistent system, each of us carries different self-parts that conflict, negotiate and compromise with one another. Most of us want to be intimate, to feel emotionally connected with another. Conversely, we also want to be independent and self-sufficient. This conflict and tension is at the core of what it means to be human. To emphasize either need too much can tilt a person into a dehumanizing disequilibrium. If one only seeks a sense of closeness, one loses a sense of oneself as being loveable. If one is totally independent of others, he or she might need to be put behind bars for being a psychopath.

One of the biggest myths about relationships is that most break-ups occur because partners can't get close enough or because they can't communicate. This makes about as much sense as saying that most people die because their brains stop working. The coincidence is accurate; the causality is not. The paradox is that most failures in intimacy occur because partners are not sufficiently separate. By "separate" I do not mean giving each other the cold shoulder or ignoring each other. I'm referring to keeping one's identity separate, valid, valuable, and whole, without requiring the other partner to provide the missing pieces. If you feel unlovable and are too ashamed to admit it even to yourself, then you're likely to claw at your partner to restore your sense of worth. You will probably try to obligate your partner as if he or she were a parent, while at the same time trying to change that parent. "If you loved me..." is a classic guilt-tripping maneuver in this fashion. Such intrusiveness, arising from enmeshed personal identities, is

far more responsible for break-ups than mere communication problems. In fact, most communication problems in intimacy derive from problems with autonomy.

While enmeshment is one of the most serious threats to intimacy, a total emphasis on independence is stunting. If there are no occasions when you can lean on the other person, you will miss a lot of the good stuff: the back rubs at night, the shared sorrow that helps reassure that you're "OK," and other affirming reminders that you really are worth being cared for by another. Yes, it is important to learn to do it yourself. But it's also important to be able to choose when to let another do it for you. The key word here is "choice." Without choice, you will lose the balancing skills required to maintain a healthy, intimate relationship.

Balancing is a good metaphor for relationships. Paradoxically, each of us wants to move in opposing directions. We want to be independent, yet we want to merge. We want to rely on ourselves, yet we want to be nurtured and affirmed by others. This balancing act needs a lot of skill. Just as the high-wire acrobat must keep his mass in motion to approximate balance, we also must stay in motion by constantly choosing our priorities among opposing needs. If we freeze into rigid roles, our intimacy is lost to the nets below. If our shame and inhibition eclipse either our need for separateness or our need for dependence, we lurch into disequilibrium. We must prevail over "The Great No-No" if we want to remain free to love. And so, we must keep on choosing, never quite settled and never permanently satisfied with the status of things. We can never finally resolve our paradox. But if we accept it and dare to keep choosing, if we have the courage to keep ourselves growing this way, then we can probably negotiate the tightrope of intimacy.